

KING CAESAR HOUSE

(The February, 1971 issue of National Antiques Review" had a piece by Abraham Brooks titled "The King Caesar House in Colonial Duxbury, Mass.," Excerpts from the article follow. -- Ed.)

"When our good friend Ruth Wakefield sent us a notice of several lectures to be held at the King Caesar House...we recognized an opportunity to meet and hear Abraham Brooks discuss pewter collecting in America today. This resident of Easton...became intrigued with the dull looking metal some years ago, and since then has compiled enough experiences AND EXPERIENCE in the buying of pewter to make him a most informative and entertaining lecturer.

"The drive to Duxbury is reason enough to get out on the roads in that area. This was part of the original early settlement of the Pilgrims and the site of the Alden House, which is located on the Blue Fish River. Not far away is the old Standish Homestead. This is a community which can name-drop antiquity to the envy of all our other early Colonial settlements, for here was where it all began in 1620. Across the harbor is dotted the Mayflower II, and not far from that is Plimoth Plantation, which is reason enough to come to this area.

"The King Caesar House is a late-comer on the scene, but one which is the envy of many historic groups. It is managed by the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society, Inc., and is located on land which abuts the ocean. Ezra Weston began his shipbuilding career in 1764 on a site first used by Thomas Prince in 1720. Soon, the yard expanded so that as many as 100 ships were being built at one time, at the ocean's edge across the road from the home built there later by his son, Ezra II. He was nicknamed "King Caesar" because of his prominence and wealth, and this title was carried to his son, who continued the growth of the yards and business until he had the largest shipbuilding concern and the most vessels afloat of anyone in this country, second only to the older concerns in England. Daniel Webster, who lived in nearby Marshfield, was a frequent visitor to his home, quite often walking there. Sometimes they would meet at the Ford Store, which was perhaps the forerunner of our large department stores, for it carried about everything. The building which housed Weston's bank was later used as the terminus for the first Franco-American telegraph cable from France, which was pulled ashore on Duxbury Beach in 1869. In commemoration, the Boston and Sandwich Glass Company originated the cable pattern, which is highly sought by collectors today. A

good collection of is featured in the King Caesar House for all to see. Also, one may see the Haviland Limoges china which was made to commemorate this cable.

The restored home is full of fine pieces related to the Duxbury area, and much in the way of Staffordshire Blue Historical China, such as the wrong-way waved plate showing the landing of the Pilgrims. The house is full of original Zuber scenic wallpaper imported from Paris, and restored to its original elegance. At the rear is the original barn, which served admirably as the meeting place for our pewter lecture.

"Mr. Brooks, a law instructor at Stonehill College, numbers over 300 pieces of pewter in his collection. He began by cautioning the group that collecting pewter is a mild form of madness. There is only one cure. Collect more pewter. Referring to it as 'poor man's silver,' he said most of the early work consisted of 80 to 90 % tin, 5% copper, and 5% of a hardening agent, such as bismuth or antimony. Quite often, Continental pewter will contain a quantity of lead, which will cheapen it. If the piece is too heavy, most often it will have less value to a collector....

"Pewter scale is a disease of the metal, and pitting makes a good piece look like a sieve....

"...Mr. Brooks recalled that very early pewter replaced the wooden or treenware during the 17th and 18th centuries. Guilds

were formed and officials were empowered to inspect, approve or condemn a man's work. The moral behavior of pewterers was also controlled right from the time the lad began his 7-year apprenticeship with a brother of the guild. At the end of his servitude, he would present the master with a test piece of his own making to get his own certification....

"After the advent of plating in the 1800s, pewter casting came to an end, and the old pieces found their way to chicken coops, barns and cellars, making way for the newer, shiny plated and Britannia pieces. Though the harder Britannia metal had been used for some years overseas, it did not come into general use here until after 1825, when pieces were first rolled in Taunton, Mass. Once huge rolling machines came into use, the sheets of metal were rolled thinner and thinner, cheapening the finished product. The graceful, simple lines of the earlier pieces disappeared during the Victorian Period, and the age of craftsmanship came to an end with the advent of machines....

(The author goes on to say that prices of early American pewter have gone all out of reason.)

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"...Plates which cost one dollar an inch in diameter are now selling for \$25 to \$50 per inch. Six-inch plates often cost more than larger ones, because fewer were made.

"Pewter has come into its own, because it is now being faked. Until 1920, it was not generally collected; there were few books on the subject, fewer collectors, and little competition in buying it. In 1918, the Society of Pewter Collectors was formed in London. Higher prices came in, and the fakers got started. Excellent copies were made, complete with dents and scratches, phony repairs and phony touchmarks. The beginner must be careful, because many of the fakes made during the 1925-35 period have aged sufficiently to look genuine. Some are so good they are even collected. In 1969 at the Fall Reading Museum in England, 40 fake pieces were displayed, some with such early dates as 1030 and 1330. Mr. Brooks revealed that some pewter is being cast in old molds today, and then aged in horse urine. This is so well done, one must break the piece open to test its age....

"Mr. Brooks said that a true collector can almost tell a fake by the feel of the piece. It is either 'right' or 'wrong,' but this ability comes with long experience. Another clue is that block letters were not used in

the old days. Unmarked pewter is not necessarily American, though it is claimed to be by some. Early American pewter was scarce. It had but about 75 years of production. Most valuable in order are the American, English, and then Continental. Since there was a scarcity of metal in Colonial days, much American pewter was made from older English pieces melted down. During the period of 1720 to 1770, there was more pewter shipped here from England than the combined imports of all other metals...."

Brooks said the best way to learn this field of collecting is to go out and handle it and read the many good books on the subject:

"Stay away from pieces which read 'Pewter,' 'Made in England,' 'Genuine Pewter,' 'Made in Germany,' and such. After purchasing a piece, if you wish to clean it, he recommends Noxon and 0000 steel wool.... As to repair, he stated, 'I like the ruins better than the reconstruction,' which might be interpreted to mean that if the damage is not too great, it is best to leave it alone...."